

AA: CHRISTIAN OR OCCULT ROOTS?

First published September 15, 1997 (Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, wayoflife.org, fbns@wayoflife.org) -- The following is by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, PsychoHeresy Awareness Letter, September-October 1997; copyright 1997; used by permission (4137 Primavera Rd., Santa Barbara, CA 93110) --

Christians continue to insist that Alcoholics Anonymous is compatible with Christianity because of its so-called Christian roots. That is because of its early connection with the Oxford Group, which is now called Moral Re-Armament (MRA). The founders of AA were involved in the Oxford Group movement during the early days, but there is no record of either Bill Wilson or Bob Smith professing Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord or as the only way to the Father. Neither is there a record of them believing or teaching that the only way of salvation is by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Frank Buchman, a Lutheran minister, began a movement which he originally called "A First Century Christian Fellowship." In 1928 the name of the movement changed to the "Oxford Group." The other leader of the movement, who was influential in the development of AA, was Samuel Shoemaker, rector of an Episcopal church. The thrust of the movement was experience rather than clear biblical doctrine.

Buchman explained that "he never touched any doctrine in any of his meetings, as he did not want to upset or offend anyone" [William C. Irvine, *Heresies Exposed*, New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1921, p. 54]. By keeping his doctrinal beliefs to himself, Buchman was able to appeal to people of all religious persuasions.

The following is Wilson's description of the Oxford Group:

"The Oxford Group was a nondenominational evangelical movement, streamlined for the modern world and then at the height of its very considerable success.... They would deal in simple common denominators of all religions which would be potent enough to change the lives of men and women" [Wilson, quoted in *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World*, New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984, pp. 127,128].

However, there is some evidence that the founders of AA did have opportunity to hear the Gospel [Samuel M. Shoemaker, *Courage to Change: The Christian Roots of the 12-Step Movement*, Bill Pittman and Dick B., eds., Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revel/Baker Book House, 1994, pp. 11-24], but instead of receiving Christ as Lord and Savior and experiencing freedom in Christ and victory over sin through faith in Christ alone, Wilson and Smith took only what they wanted from the Oxford Group. Here we will examine three aspects of what AA borrowed: guidance, surrender, and moral principles.

OCCULT GUIDANCE

Members of the Oxford Group practiced what they called guidance by praying and then quieting their minds in order to hear from God. Then they would write down whatever came to them [Ibid., p. 158]. Examples of such "guidance" are in the book *God Calling*, edited by A. J. Russell of the Oxford Group [A. J. Russell, ed., *God Calling*, New York: Jove Publications, 1978]. The book was written anonymously by two women who thought they were hearing from God, but who passively received messages in the same way spiritists obtain guidance from demons.

Members of the Oxford Group primarily found their guidance from within rather than from a creed or the Bible. Buchman, for instance, was known to spend “an hour or more in complete silence of soul and body while he gets guidance for that day” [William C. Irvine, *Heresies Exposed*, New York: Loizeaux Bro., 1921, pp. 58,59].

J. C. Brown in his book *The Oxford Group Movement* says of Buchman:

“He teaches his votaries to wait upon God with paper and pencil in hand each morning in this relaxed and inert condition, and to write down whatever guidance they get. This, however, is just the very condition required by Spiritist mediums to enable them to receive impressions from evil spin and it is a path which, by abandoning the Scripture-instructed judgment (which God always demands) for the purely occult and the psychic, has again and again led over the precipice. The soul that reduces itself to an automaton may at any moment be set spinning by a Demon” [J.C. Brown, quoted by Irvine, *ibid.*, p. 49].

Dr. Rowland V. Bingham, Editor of *The Evangelical Christian* says:

“We do not object to their taking a pad and pencil to write down any thoughts of guidance which come to them. But to take the thoughts especially generated in a mental vacuum as Divine guidance would throw open to all the suggestions of another who knows how to come as an angel of light and whose illumination would lead to disaster” [Rowland V. Bingham, quoted by Irvine, *ibid.*, p. 50].

In a very real sense their personal journals became their personal scriptures.

Wilson practiced this passive form of guidance, which he originally learned through the Oxford Group. He and Smith were also heavily involved in contacting and conversing with so-called departed spirits from 1935 on. This is necromancy, which the Bible forbids. During the same period of time, Wilson was practicing spiritism in a manner similar to channeling [Pass It On, op. cit., pp. 275-283]. Thus, Wilson combined the Oxford Group practice of guidance with spiritism or channeling, and this appears to be the process he used when writing the Twelve Steps:

“As he started to write, he asked for guidance. And he relaxed. The words began tumbling out with astonishing speed” [*Ibid.*, p. 198].

Wilson was accustomed to asking for guidance and then stilling his mind to be open to the spiritual world, which for him involved various so-called departed spirits. Wilson does not identify any specific entity related to the original writing of the Twelve Steps, but he does give credit to the spirit of a departed bishop when he was writing the manuscript for Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, which constitutes Wilson’s commentary on how all of the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions are to be understood, interpreted, and practiced.

When he wrote the essays on each of the twelve steps, he sent some to Ed Dowling, a Roman Catholic priest, to evaluate. In his accompanying letter of July 17, 1952, Wilson says, “But I have good help - of that I am certain. Both over here and over there” [Robert Fitzgerald, S.J., *The Soul of Sponsorship: The Friendship of Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J. and Bill Wilson in Letters*, Center City, MN.: Hazelden Pittman Archives Press, 1995, p. 59]. Then he explains that one spirit from “over there” that helped him called himself Boniface. Wilson says:

“One turned up the other day calling himself Boniface. Said he was a Benedictine missionary and English. Had been a man of learning, knew missionary work and a lot about structures. I think he said this all the more modestly but that was the gist of it. I’d

never heard of this gentleman but he checked out pretty well in the Encyclopedia. If this one is who he says he is--and of course there is no certain way of knowing--would this be licit contact in your book?" [Ibid., p. 59].

Dowling responds in his letter of July 24, 1952:

"Boniface sounds like the Apostle of Germany. I still feel, like Macbeth, that these folks tell us truth in small matters in order to fool us in larger. I suppose that is my lazy orthodoxy" (Ibid., p. 59).

One can see the stretch of years during which Wilson received messages from disembodied spirits. The official biography of Bill Wilson says, "One of Bill's persistent fascinations and involvements was with psychic phenomena." It speaks of his "belief in clairvoyance and other extrasensory manifestations" and in his own psychic ability [Pass It On., op. cit., p. 275]. This was not a mere past-time. It was a passion directly related to AA [Ibid., p. 280]. The manner in which Wilson would receive messages not of his own making was definitely channeling [Ibid., pp. 278,279]. The records of these sessions, referred to as "Spook Files," have been closed to public inspection [Ernest Kurtz, Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, Center City, MN.: Hazelden Educational Materials, 1979, p. 344].

Satan can appear as an angel of light and give guidance that may sound right because it may be close to the truth or contain elements of truth. A discerning Christian would avoid any guidance that comes through occult methods. Therefore, this aspect of the Oxford Group, further contaminated by spiritism, cannot constitute any "Christian root" condoning Christians using and promoting AA.

SURRENDER

Step Three of AA is "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him." While many in the Oxford Group placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, there was much leeway given. Shoemaker, a leader of the Oxford Group, says that "the true meaning of faith is self-surrender to God." He further explains:

"Surrender to whatever you know about Him, or believe must be the truth about Him. Surrender to Him, if necessary, in total ignorance of Him. Far more important that you touch Him than that you understand Him at first. Put yourself in His hands. Whatever He is, as William James said, He is more ideal than we are. Make the leap. Give yourself to Him" [Shoemaker, op. cit., p. 44].

Aside from capitalizing the "H," which Christians do to refer to the God of the Bible, "Him" could refer to any god of one's own making. The reference to the psychologist William James emphasizes Shoemaker's faith in the power experience over the truth of God" [See Bobgan & Bobgan, 12 Steps to Destruction: Codependency/Recovery Heresies, Santa Barbara, CA: EastGate Pub., 1991, pp. 88,89].

Shoemaker believed that people would come to know God by experiencing Him through surrender and through following certain moral principles. He says, "The new life begins by utter self-dedication to the will of God. All of us can do that, and must" [Ibid., p. 46].

One can see how surrender to a god of one's own creation found its way into the Twelve Steps of AA. When a person is not clear about the Gospel, who Jesus is and what He did to save sinners, he is not presenting a Christian message. AA picked up the idea of surrender, but without Christ and without the whole counsel of God.

Surrendering to anyone but the God of the Bible constitutes idolatry. AA is another religion with its own forms of piety, including surrender to a nebulous higher power. This pious surrender does not constitute a “Christian root” that can justify Christians using and promoting AA.

MORAL PRINCIPLES AND THEIR SOURCE

In describing itself as an organization, this is what MRA (formerly called the Oxford Group) says about itself:

“MRA is a world wide network of women and men who have started with themselves to bring the changes they want to see around them” [“What Is MRA?” Moral Re-Armament, 1885 University Ave. W. #10, St. Paul, MN 55104].

Here’s how they start with themselves:

“To start with yourself, you measure how you are now living by absolute moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. (For Christians these are in the Sermon on the Mount; they are also found in other major religions” [Ibid.].

People are told to make a list and then “give all you know of yourself to all you understand of God, and ask God’s help to put right those things beyond your own power to change.” So far there is no information about which god one is to choose, since one can follow any religion or no religion.

While some in MRA may read the Bible, as they did in its early Oxford Group days, the primary source of knowledge is the “inner voice.” Here are the instructions given in the MRA brochure:

“Take time to listen every day to the inner voice, write down your thoughts, and obey those that conform to these standards” [Ibid.].

Even though a follower of MRA attempts to follow moral standards from the Bible or the moral teachings of any other religion, his primary light is that inner voice and his primary goal is self-improvement. No cross is necessary; no shed blood is required. LIKE AA, MRA IS A RELIGION OF WORKS. Here is what MRA says about its “religious affiliation”:

“It has always been a Christian based, interfaith work. It brings together people of all backgrounds and cultures in a program of effective change using principles that are accepted by every major faith” [Ibid.].

Aside from the words “Christian based,” that definition sounds like a description of AA. But how can it be truly “Christian based” when it is without the cross and without a Lord Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6)? RATHER THAN FAITH IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED, MRA IS A RELIGION OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT AND SUBJECTIVE MYSTICISM.

One can indeed see the similarity between the Oxford Group (MRA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Both allow Christians to participate as long as they do not preach Christ and Him crucified or dare to say that He is the only way to the Father. Both appeal to an unidentified god, both rely on mysticism, and both aim for self-improvement. What AA got from the Oxford Group was clearly not Christianity. There are no “Christian roots.” BECAUSE THE CENTRAL CORE DOCTRINES OF CHRISTIANITY ARE ABSENT, AA

CONSTITUTES A COUNTERFEIT RELIGION, NOT A NEUTRAL ORGANIZATION WITH
“CHRISTIAN ROOTS.”

(For more information about AA, see the book 12 Steps to Destruction by Martin and Deidre Bobgan. Order from PsychoHeresy Awareness Ministries, 4137 Primavera Rd., Santa Barbara, CA 93110. The PsychoHeresy Awareness web site is located at <http://www.silcom.com/~phbobgan>.)